

CENTURY OLD FARMHOUSES
OLEY VALLEY—BERKS COUNTY
PENNSYLVANIA
BY DEAN KENNEDY

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Doorway Detail

THE HUNTER HOUSE, NEAR YELLOW HOUSE, PENNSYLVANIA

[214]

FARMHOUSES OF OLEY VALLEY

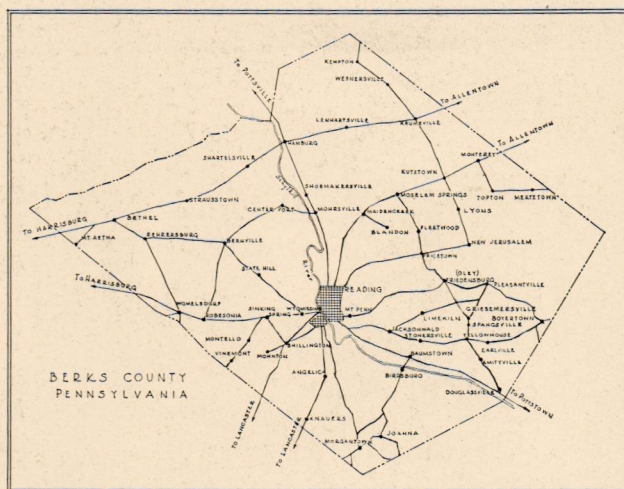
BERKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

THE fertile limestone Valley of Oley in the County of Berks, Pennsylvania, furnishes us with a valuable architectural heritage. The area of the valley consists of some thirty square miles and is situated near Reading in the eastern portion of the county as may be seen in the accompanying map. In Friedensburg (Oley), Pleasantville, Lime Kiln, Spangsville, and Yellow House we find excellent examples of century old farmhouses which contribute much to our understanding of the homes of our ancestors and to the records of early American architecture.

The settlers who arrived during the latter part of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries were chiefly French Huguenot refugees, fleeing from their native country to escape the persecutions of the times and coming in search of religious freedom in a place where they could make their new homes.

William Penn, when first laying out his colony in 1682, divided it into three counties, Philadelphia, Chester, and Bucks, all radiating from a point where the city of Philadelphia now stands. Naturally, the first settlers followed the water courses to their best advantage. The Swedes, coming up the Schuylkill River, settled above the mouth of the Monocacy Creek, where the town of Douglassville is now located. There today may be found some of the earliest signs of civilized life in the County, and a few of the early houses, including the Mounce Jones House, erected in 1716, which is perhaps the oldest house still standing in what is now Berks County.

Following the Swedes, the English Quakers, coming up the Manatawny Creek, located in the present Oley, along with a number of French and Swiss Huguenots, as well as German families. Such Huguenot names as DeTurk, De LaVan, De LaPlank, Bertelot, DeLong, as well as others have survived from the earliest



settlement to the present time.

In 1698, John Keim, a young German, was the first known settler to stake and lay claim to a tract of land in Oley. In 1706, returning from Europe with his bride, he began to clear his land for cultivation and later erected a stone dwelling, which is still standing. In 1712, Isaac DeTurck, a brother-in-law of Keim, coming from New York, settled on a tract

near the present village of Friedensburg.

Between this time and 1720 other French Huguenots, as well as the Lees, English Quakers, headed by Anthony Lee, the first to arrive in Oley, in 1718 settled in what is now known as the village of Pleasantville. The Lees were soon joined by the Boone family and others of the same religion, and as early as 1726 they had organized themselves into a separate congregation and built their first church of logs. In 1736 it is known that George Boone collected funds for a larger and better structure. Later this also was found to be insufficient, and the third, the present Exeter Friends' Meeting House, was built sometime before 1800, the exact date is unknown. It is one of the oldest Quaker Meeting Houses in Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia.

In the possession of Daniel Fisher, present owner, and great-grandson of Henry Fisher, the builder of the Fisher Homestead near Yellow House, there is a brief of title stating that on April 20, 1682, during the reign of King Charles II, William Penn, of Worminghurst, Sussex County, England, deeded to John Sheiras of York County, England, 1,000 acres of land in the Province of Pennsylvania. The land changed hands several times until, in 1791, John Leshar sold some three hundred acres to Henry Fisher, showing that a large part of the land must have been sold off before this time. The buildings on the



EXETER FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE, NEAR STONERSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

land were already old and as soon as it could be arranged, preparations were made for building a new house, which was finished in 1801. Nearby stands a large spring house in which, no doubt, the family lived while the house was being erected.

The Kaufman House, illustrated on page 228, is an example of one of the original houses to be found in the Valley although somewhat larger than the majority. This house, like so many others in the neighborhood, is now used as an outbuilding for the new house which was built when larger quarters were needed. These first houses are sturdy old places of stone and timber, entirely lacking in embellishment but beautiful in their proportions. Often built into the slope of a hill near or directly over a spring, the houses thereby served the double purpose of dwelling and spring house. The plan is usually rectangular with but one or two main rooms on each floor. The kitchen is on the lower floor, in cases where the house was built into a hill. Here one may see the huge fireplace with smoked hewn timber lintel and simple board mantel shelf.

The Fisher House, today, is perhaps the best preserved in the Oley Valley, outside of some that have been restored, and may well be considered typical of

the Pennsylvania farmhouse. The exterior walls are of limestone, as are the majority of the dwellings of this type. There is a pedimented doorway at the center of the broad front of the main rectangle, opening into a spacious hallway, dividing the large rooms devoted to living and dining purposes. The kitchen is in a wing which projects from the main house. This addition is also built of rough stone but the original detail has been modified.

The flat arch above the window openings deserves mention, because a similar form of stone arch frequently occurs in houses throughout Pennsylvania. Here in the Fisher House a flat arch is fashioned of wood, with a central key block of greater height than the adjoining pieces. The cornice mouldings and doorway detail seem to be identical with many of the other houses and it is interesting to note how the modification of the same detail has been used on the main cornice, the pedimented doorway, the mantels, and the cornices of rooms and hallways. The detail may have been original with the builder or more probably copied from some carpenter's manual so much in use at that time. The chief carpenter of the Fisher House is known to have been Gottlieb Drexel, and to him belongs the credit of the fine paneling, stairway,

[216]

friezes, cornices, and other architectural features.

The house contains six fireplaces, some of which are faced on the outside with Italian marble and plastered on the inside. Possibly the most beautiful of these, and the most intricate in its detail, is the one in the bridal chamber or guest room, illustrated on pages 221 and 222.

The George Boone House, erected in 1733, with its whitewashed stone walls, is interesting in its spacing of windows on the front wall and the lack of windows and the mere slits which occur on the end walls. A line of timber may be seen projecting on the end walls, as if to form the gable end but on further thought the wall was moved back some few feet. Evidently the wall was never terminated to form this gable as no distinct jointing can be seen where the new wall would have joined the old, and the date 1733 scratched into one of the sandstone quoins of the rear wall leads one to believe this was the original wall. However, the difference in the pitch of the two

roofs gives anything but a pleasing proportion. It is said that George Boone, the grandfather of Daniel Boone, was well content to live in his simple log cabin nearby until his death in 1744, declaring the new home was much too pretentious for his simple tastes. It was actually occupied by his eldest son, George Boone, II.

It is an interesting fact that these early homesteads, found within a radius of a few miles, have remained in the possession of descendants for the past century.

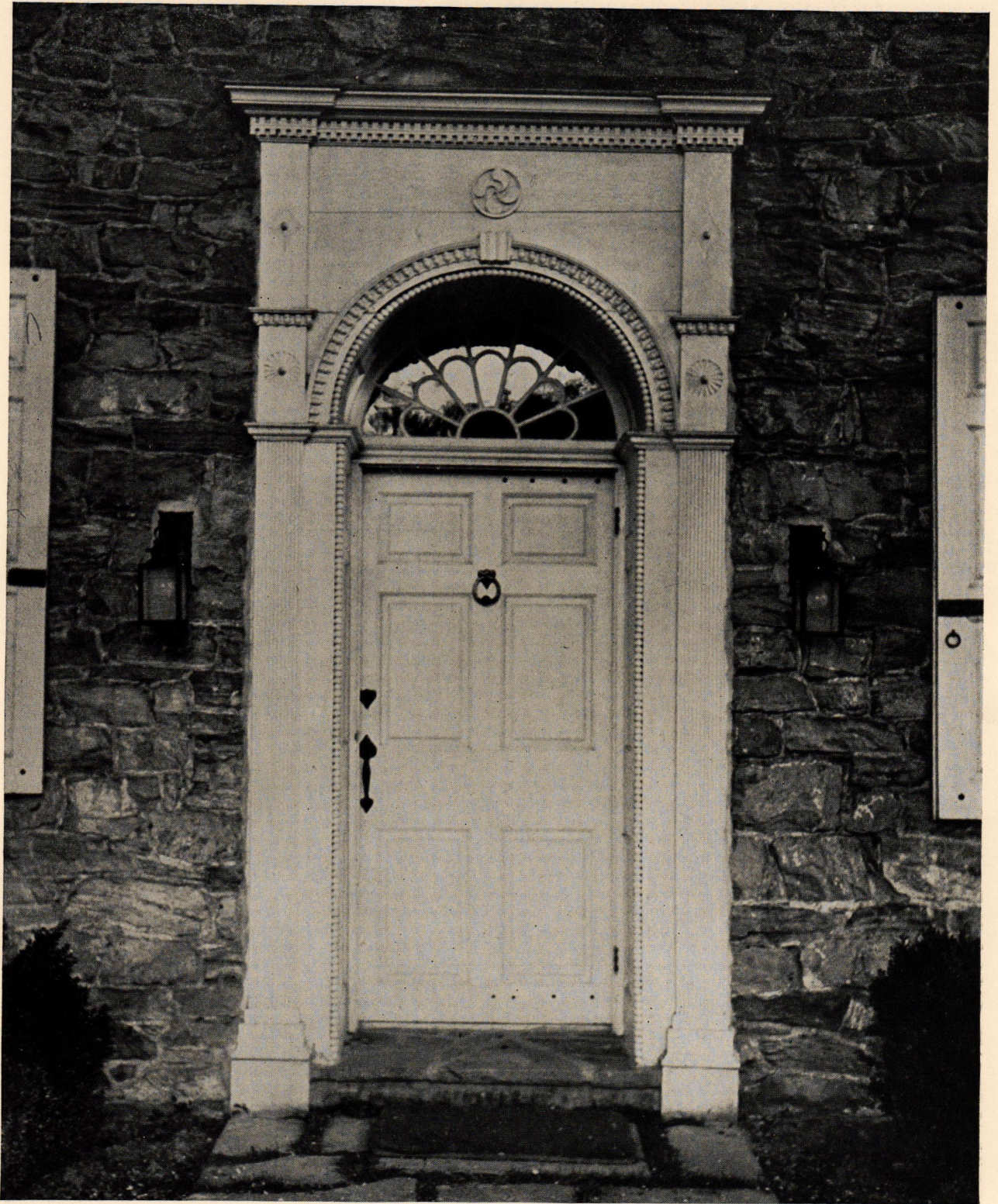
Much could and has been said of the picturesque outbuildings, the spring and tenant houses, bake ovens and smoke houses spotting the Oley countryside, with their whitewashed or plastered stone walls, and many still retaining their weathered red tile roofs. All of these, worked out and planned to the best advantage, together with the well built farmhouses, speak loudly of the thrift, domestic loyalty, and good taste of these early immigrants.

DEAN KENNEDY.



THE GEORGE BOONE HOUSE, NEAR LIME KILN, PENNSYLVANIA

[217]



Doorway Detail

THE KNABB HOUSE, NEAR LIME KILN, PENNSYLVANIA

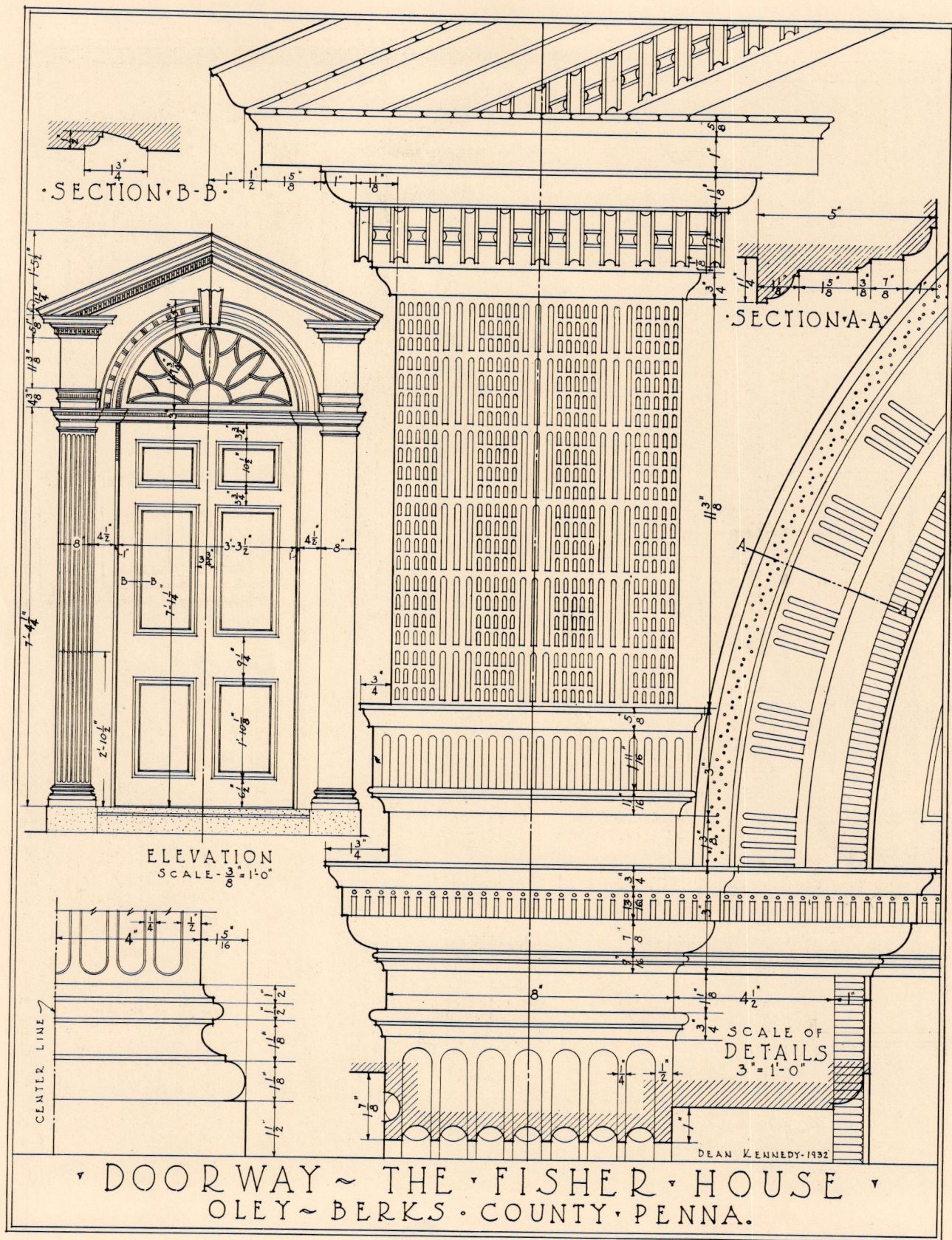
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Doorway Detail—See Measured Drawing, Page 220

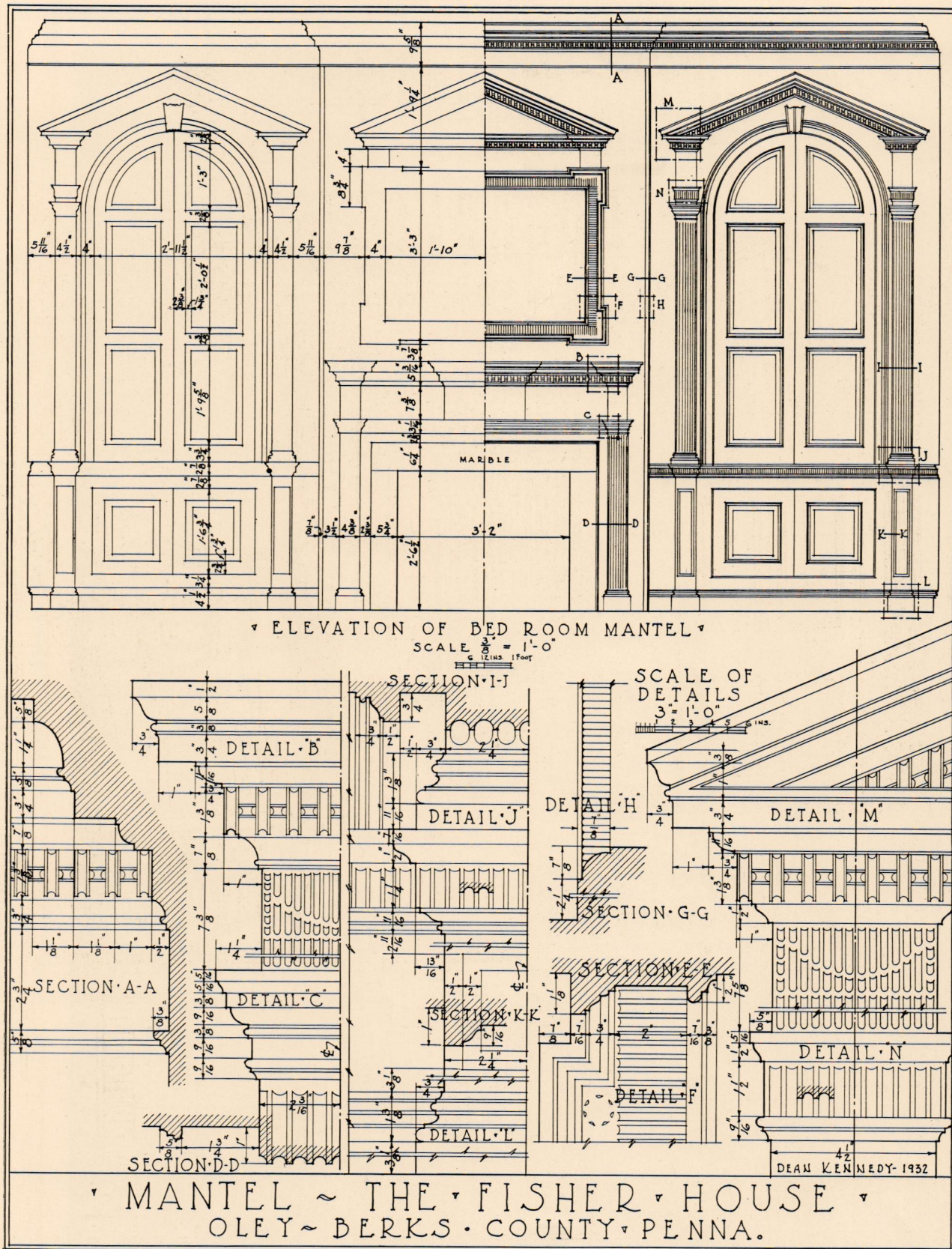
THE FISHER HOUSE, NEAR YELLOW HOUSE, PENNSYLVANIA

[219]



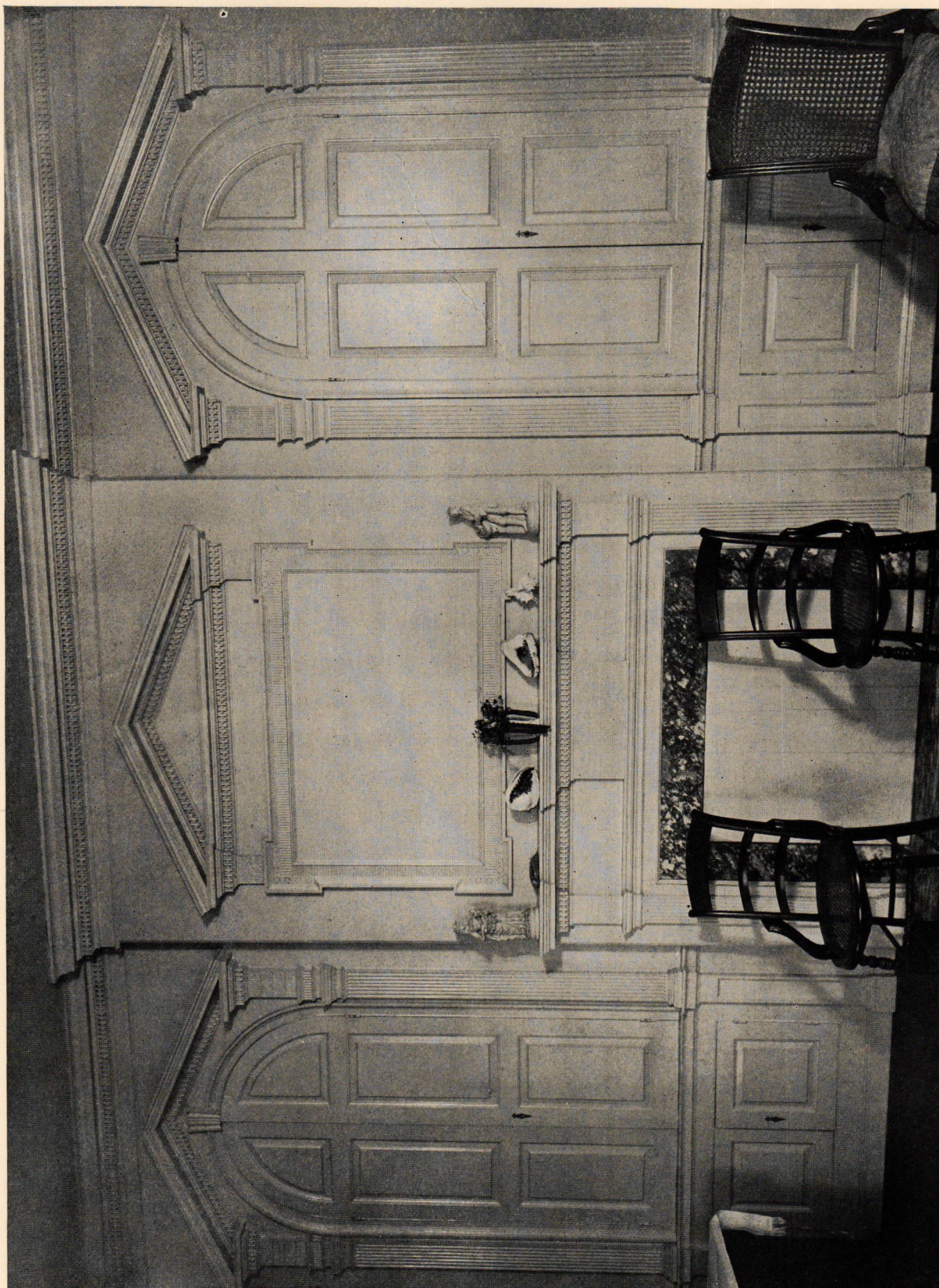
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[220]



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[221]



See Measured Drawing, Page 221

BRIDAL CHAMBER—THE FISHER HOUSE, NEAR YELLOW HOUSE, PENNSYLVANIA



THE FISHER HOUSE, NEAR YELLOW HOUSE, PENNSYLVANIA

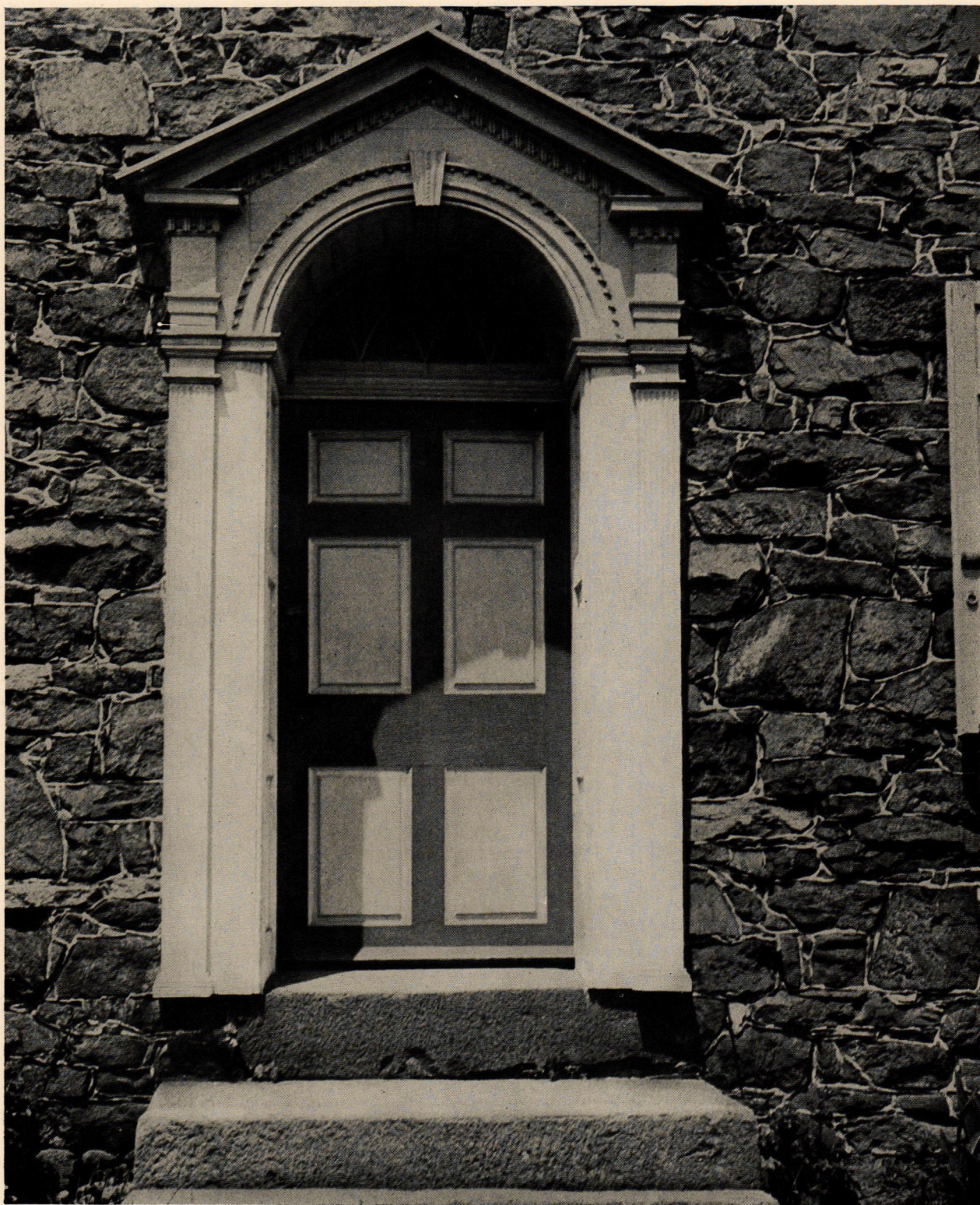
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First Floor Hallway

THE FISHER HOUSE, NEAR YELLOW HOUSE, PENNSYLVANIA

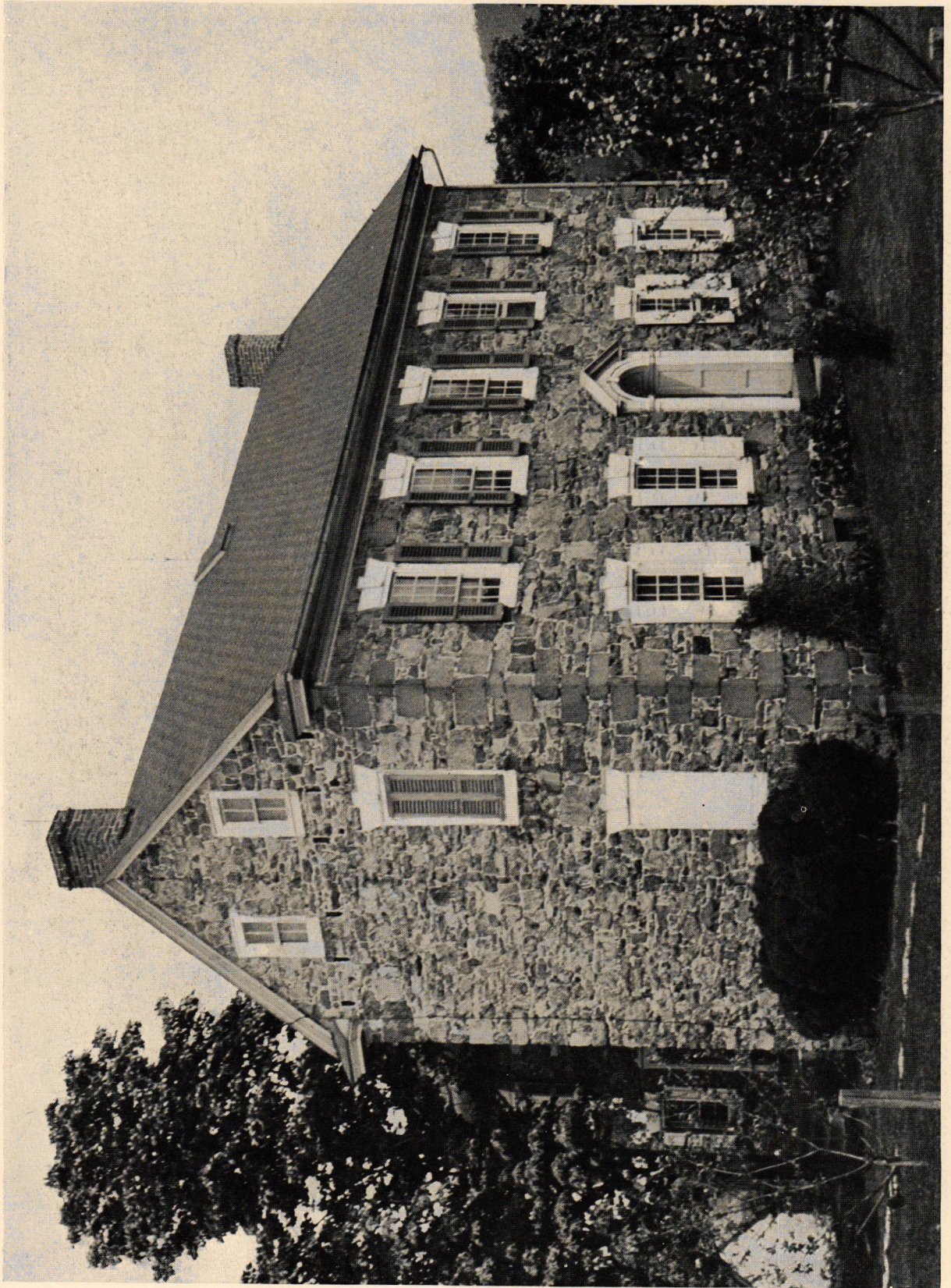
[224]



Doorway Detail

THE SPANG HOUSE, SPANGSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

[225]



THE SPANG HOUSE, SPANGSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

[226]



THE HUNTER HOUSE, NEAR YELLOW HOUSE, PENNSYLVANIA

[227]



THE ORIGINAL KAUFMAN HOUSE, NEAR PLEASANTVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

[228]